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Montrealers protested against vaccine mandates Oct. 9, 2021. PHOTO BY DAVE SIDAWAY /Montreal Gazette

With less than a week before non-vaccinated health-care workers face suspensions, several hundred protesters took their angry message to the streets of downtown Montreal on Saturday.

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The march began at the foot of the Jacques Cartier Bridge at 1 p.m. and wound its way through the downtown core before ending at Dorchester Square just before 4 p.m. Among the roughly 600 people who participated, none were wearing masks.

The protesters were speaking out against the forced vaccine mandate that will come into effect on Oct. 15, which could result in the suspension of about 15,000 health-care workers in the province who opted not to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

Among the protesters was Sacha Kulenovic, an orderly at the CHUM's intensive-care unit, who said he faces suspension because he has opted not to be vaccinated.

"I have doubts, but instead of trying to alleviate our doubts, the government is just trying to scare us into getting vaccinated," said Kulenovic, wearing light-blue scrubs and jeans.

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Another nurse was holding a sign that read: Last year, heroes; this year, unemployed.

The woman, who works in a hospital at Joliette, said she's not against the idea of vaccines, but she wants to wait until the vaccine has been shown not to have harmful effects.

"It's in trial mode until 2023," said the woman, who didn't want to give her name. "I'm not against getting the vaccine, but I want more information."

The four vaccines approved by Health Canada were rigorously tested before their authorization. Post-approval monitoring has shown rare side-effects including myocarditis, facial paralysis and blood clots, but serious events represent less than 0.01 per cent of vaccine doses administered, and only six deaths in Canada have been conclusively linked to a COVID-19 vaccine (all from the AstraZeneca vaccine), according to statistics compiled by Health Canada. "The benefits of vaccines authorized in Canada continue to outweigh the risks," the agency says.

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Another woman at Saturday's protest, who was wearing dark blue scrubs that bore the name CISSS Laval, said she was there in support of health-care workers.

"Everyone has the right to decide for their bodies. If something is imposed on us, it's a violation," she said.

There were signs in support of Donald Trump, including a Make America Great Again flag. There were also several people wearing yellow stars of David, which symbolizes the measures taken to limit the freedom of millions of Jewish people in Europe during the Holocaust, during which 6 million died at the hands of the Nazis. This is not the first time protesters have worn the star. A similar protest in August also had displays of the star.

Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, said Sunday it "strongly encourages individuals and public organizations to refrain from using the Holocaust and images associated with it to further their agendas and causes that are totally unrelated to the Holocaust. Manipulating the Holocaust in this way trivializes the horrific atrocities that were perpetrated and denigrates the memory of victims and survivors."

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Jews in Europe were forced by the Nazis to wear the badges, marked in the centre with the German word for Jew, to identify them so they could be singled out for persecution, humiliation, arrest, deportation and murder.

In June, the Anti-Defamation League also criticized the anti-vaccine community for using Holocaust imagery, saying it "wrongly compares the anti-semitic, racist, misogynist, xenophobic and homophobic Nazi regime and its genocidal acts to current government measures to contain the pandemic."

During the anti-vaccine protest, Health Minister Christian Dubé reacted on Twitter, saying the province intends to stay with its obligation for all 330,000 health-care workers to be vaccinated or face suspension without pay. He said important services will have to be reorganized in order to make up for the shortage of workers.

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"The only way to diminish the impacts of this is to go get vaccinated," he said.

Susan Schwartz contributed to this report.

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